



My memory of climbing Croagh Patrick

BY MARY BURKE FROM COUNTY MAYO

Over 50 years ago I climbed Croagh Patrick, or “The Reek” as it is known, for the first time. I was 18 at the time and can remember the great excitement of getting ready to travel to the Reek. A group of us travelled by bus. On arrival, we put on our heavy shoes and made sure to get a stick which were on sale at the bottom of The Reek. At that time, the climb took place at night and we started to climb at 2 a.m. It was very dark and cold and there was always a mist. And always a big number of people. It was very difficult and dangerous climbing in the dark but most people had torches and prayed the Rosary on the way up. Some people climbed in their bare feet. People were so devout, young and not so young, went up that mountain. I felt there was always a prayerful atmosphere in those days. It was a very holy mountain. Saint Patrick prayed and fasted for 40 days on Croagh Patrick.

It was great to reach the summit and to attend mass on the top of the mountain. In those days you might be lucky to get a cup of tea or even some water. When I think of it now, some people brought utensils to make tea and carried them up the mountain. It was a very difficult climb in the dark but Saint Patrick himself had set a tough task. He did all this for our country and to think what has been lost. Please God, the faith will be re-kindled through the intercession of St. Patrick.

In 1974, the times for climbing were changed to daylight hours which made it a bit easier and safer. I climbed Croagh Patrick 7 times when I was younger. I always felt great peace when I completed the pilgrimage. I hope more of our youth will make this pilgrimage to atone for all the wrong that has been done. I got this prayer in a church newsletter:

God our Father, you sent Saint Patrick to preach your glory to the people of Ireland. By the help of his prayers, may all Christians proclaim Your love to all men. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Saint Patrick arrived at Croagh Patrick on the Saturday before Ash Wednesday 441 AD. He wished to imitate Christ, Moses and Elijah by fasting for 40 days and 40 nights. St. Patrick's buried his faithful charioteer, at the foot of the mountain, before beginning his climb to the summit. On Ash Wednesday, he began 40 days of prayer and penance to pray for Ireland. St. Patrick persevered in prayer and fasting until he won from God the favour that that Ireland would always keep the faith and that he himself would be the judge of every Irish soul. On Easter Saturday he descended Croagh Patrick travelling 8 miles to Aghadowey where he celebrated Easter. In the words of Dr. Fergus, Bishop of Achonry, on 22 October 1961, during the Patrician Year celebrations at Croagh Patrick, “The heroic act of penance has caught the imagination of the Irish people and has brought them in pilgrimage to the Reek from the earliest times - the St. Patrick we know best is St. Patrick of the Reek, mighty in his penance”. St. Patrick pray for us, pray for Ireland.